

**Easter! So What?
Where, Death, is Your Victory?
1 Corinthians 15:50-58**

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Easter Sunday**

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Text Introduction: Through the years you have grown accustomed to my question, “So What?” at the conclusion of my messages. I fell into this practice a few years ago as the result of making sure that every message ends on a note of action. As I routinely say, “We gather not so much for information, but for inspiration and transformation.” I pray we do that today. I want desperately for us to recognize the “So what” of Easter.

I have been studying questions that appear in the Easter narratives of the Gospels. Any of these questions help us get to the heart of the So What of Easter—the combined events of the cross and the Resurrection. For example, Pilate, the official of the Romans, asked Jesus, “What is truth?” Jesus asked this poignant and emotional question, “My God, My God, why have you abandoned Me?” These questions are powerful and meaningful.

But today, we ask a rhetorical question that Paul raised as he closed his wonderful summary of the importance of the resurrection. We find it in the glorious 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians.

Text: ⁵⁰ What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor can corruption inherit incorruption. ⁵¹ Listen, I am telling you a mystery: We will not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For this corruptible body must be clothed with incorruptibility, and this mortal body must be clothed with immortality. ⁵⁴ When this corruptible body is clothed with incorruptibility, and this mortal body is clothed with immortality, then the saying that is written will take place:

Death has been swallowed up in victory.

⁵⁵ Where, death, is your victory?

Where, death, is your sting?

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

⁵⁸ Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord’s work, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Introduction: The flow of this letter to the Corinthians called in our Bibles “First Corinthians” is dependent upon questions that the Corinthian church had apparently raised with the Apostle Paul. Paul began his letter by addressing more crucial matters that he wanted to address. He addressed problems that were in the church—problems of division and problems of sin. Then, in chapter 7 Paul began to address some of the apparent questions raised by the Corinthians. The final two chapters seem to be a return to Paul’s ideas. The way I read chapter 15 is basically, “OK, let’s get back to the main thing. Let’s

return our attention to the most fundamental belief that we have as Christians. Let's return to that foundational truth by which the whole of our belief either stands or falls—The resurrection.

In fact, someone said that the resurrection is God's "Amen" to the pronouncement from Jesus on the cross that "It is finished."

Let me isolate four truths for us this morning so that we might discover the "So What of Easter."

Jesus' resurrection is the most important Christian doctrine.

The resurrection had a profound impact on the eyewitnesses. The resurrection was the foundational aspect of the preaching of the apostles. The first Christians shifted their worship from the Sabbath Saturday to the first day of the week—Sunday—because of the resurrection. Some have called the resurrection the theological "lightning rod of the early church."¹ The resurrection deserves to be called that historically and deserves to be called that today.

Verses 12-19 list at least 6 crucial matters that all hinge on the validity of the resurrection. Without the resurrection of Jesus...

1. Our preaching is useless.
2. Our faith is useless.
3. Every witness is a liar.
4. We are still in our sins.
5. The dead are hopeless.
6. Christians are to be pitied.

All of these truths stand or fall on the validity of the resurrection. So, Paul answers, "But now Christ is risen from the dead." So, the implications of our belief are these statements in reverse.

1. Our preaching is not useless.
2. Our faith is not useless.
3. Every witness is a truth-speaker.
4. We are not still in our sins. We are in fact forgiven of our sins.
5. The dead are not hopeless. The dead are alive in Christ. The dead live again.
6. Christians are not to be pitied. Instead, all who are not believers in Christ are to be pitied, prayed for, and earnestly sought after, even persuaded to believe in Jesus. Without Him, there is simply no hope.

Timothy Keller, a pastor and phenomenal writer puts it this way in his book, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*:

If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all He said; if He didn't rise from the dead, they why worry about any of what He said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like His teaching but whether or not He rose from the dead."²

Your response to Jesus' resurrection is life's most important decision.

¹ Preben Vang, *Teach the Text Commentary Series*, p. 205.

² *Ibid.*, p. 205.

The truth of the resurrection becomes personal when you believe in the resurrection.

In the first part of this chapter, Paul acknowledged that the Corinthians had taken their “stand” and this was the basis for which they were being “saved.” (15:1-2). Paul indicated the eyewitness accounts of those associated with Jesus, how He had appeared to Peter and the Twelve, then over 500, and to James. We could add to that the progress of the early church as evidence for the resurrection. But Paul knew what we must know—this belief must become personal.

The word Gospel literally means “good news.” But, the Gospel is only good news to you if you believe. To Martha in John 11 at the raising of Lazarus, Jesus declared, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Then, he asked, “Do you believe this?” Notice about this question:

- Individual question—This is a question “for you.”
- Simple question—“Do you believe ‘this’?” Don’t think you have to know everything.
- Faith question
- Eternal question

Indeed, this is life’s most important decision.

Jesus’ resurrection and your response is the most important rebuttal to death.

I love to read these words at the grave site portion of funeral services for a believer in Jesus. There we are with rows and rows of headstones. Each of those headstones with a date of birth and date of death. But then to read these words: “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, death, is your victory? Where, death, is your sting?” Because of the resurrection, we can know that our belief in Jesus, gives to us eternal life in Heaven.

We have in recent days mourned the passing of the great evangelist of our time, Billy Graham. Some time ago, the city of Charlotte, North Carolina honored him. He commented that he had bought a new suit for the occasion. He surprised the audience by announcing this new suit would be the one he would be buried in.

Then he told a funny story about Albert Einstein traveling from Princeton on a train. The conductor came in to punch the tickets, and the absent-minded Einstein couldn’t find his ticket. He felt in his coat pockets, then his vest pockets, and then his pants pockets—no ticket. The conductor said, “Dr. Einstein, we all know who you are, and I’m sure you bought a ticket, so don’t worry about it.” Einstein nodded and said, “Thank you.”

A few minutes later the conductor walked by and saw the great scientist on his hands and knees searching under his seat for his ticket. The conductor said, “Dr. Einstein, I told you not to worry about your ticket. I know who you are, so it’s okay.” Dr. Einstein said, “Young, man, I, too, know who I am. What I don’t know is where I’m going.”

Then Billy Graham said, "When you see me in my casket wearing this suit, remember that I not only know who I am, but I know where I'm going." Because your sins can be forgiven, you can know where you'll go after you die.³ The resurrection changes the way that we think about death. The resurrection accompanied by our right response to the resurrection is a victorious, resounding rebuttal to death.

Jesus' resurrection and your response is the most important encouragement to daily life.

We see this challenge in the last verse of 1 Corinthians 15. On the basis of the resurrection and our belief in the resurrection, while we are still living, we are steadfast, immovable, and abounding in the Lord's work.

Paul Azinger, professional golfer, was diagnosed with cancer in 1993. He wrote about his experience in these terms. The next thing I know, I'm in an x-ray room lying on an ice cold table--shivering from nervousness. It was an awful feeling. As I lay there while the technician adjusted the machines, a genuine feeling of fear came upon me--I could die from cancer. But then another reality hit me even harder--I'm going to die eventually anyway. Whether from cancer or something else, I'm definitely going to die. It's just a question of when. In that same moment, something Larry Moody, the man who leads our Bible study on the PGA Tour, has said to me many times came to mind: "Zinger, we're not in the land of the living going to the land of the dying. We're in the land of the dying, on our way to the land of the living. "My major championship, my ten victories before that, everything I had accomplished in golf became meaningless to me. All I wanted to do was live. I don't know how successful you are. I don't know how big your house is, how much money you have, or how nice your car is. But I'm telling you, we came into this world with nothing and we're leaving with nothing. And everything we get along the way is a blessing from God. If you're finding your contentment and happiness in your accomplishments or from the amount of money and possessions you own, I'm here to tell you, it doesn't last. I've made a lot of money since I've been on Tour, and I've won a lot of tournaments. That happiness is always temporary. The only way you will ever have true contentment is in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I'm not saying that nothing ever bothers me and I don't have problems, but I feel like I've found the answer to the six-foot hole. I know I'll spend eternity with God. And I have a promise that as a child of God, He'll help me deal with anything. He promises to give me contentment no matter what life brings--even cancer. God did not intend for this world to be the best of all possible places. But it's a place where we can prepare for the best of all possible places."⁴

So, someone might say, "O.K., so to follow Jesus means I just forget about everything else. NO! Listen to these concluding words from Azinger.

People often ask me now, "Zinger, is golf still as important to you as it was before you had cancer?"

Yes and no. Yes, of course, golf is important to me. I love the game; it is how I make a living. But no, golf is no longer at the top of my priority list. You won't hear me out on the course, saying, "Woe is me. I missed that four-footer, but at least I'm alive." Oh, no. I'm playing to win. But then, in many ways, I have already won.

³ Story from Sermon by David Dykes, Green Acres Baptist Church, Tyler, Texas. Sermon from July 6, 2003.

⁴ Paul Azinger, "Facing Death," originally published in *The Links Letter*, January 1995.